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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000153

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/23/2018

TAGS: PGOV KDEM NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: IBB CONFIDANT SAYS YAR'ADUA HAS FOOD POISONING

Classified By: Consul General Donna Blair for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Professor Ukandi G. Damachi (strictly protect throughout), confidant of former military head of state Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB) told Pol-Econ Chief that President Yar'Adua is ill with food poisoning. The remainder of the conversation followed a line of argument we have heard from other southern interlocutors: Northern elites fear the Presidency will revert to the South, the military is restive, vague allusions to some sort of action that will involve retired generals or former military heads of state. Damachi offered no more proof of his assertions than have others. However, in light of his close relationship with IBB, we repeat the conversation here for what it is worth. Regarding the President's illness, we note that in Abuja circles we have not heard the food poisoning scenario, although we have heard the allergic reaction scenario. National Security Advisor reported to the Ambassador April 21 that the President was due back in-country around April 28-29. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Pol-Econ Chief met on April 23 with Professor Ukandi G. Damachi, a confidant of former President Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB) and longstanding contact of the Consulate. (Note: Damachi became a U.S. citizen earlier this year. End Note) Damachi opened the conversation by saying "There are lots of problems in Nigeria." The first problem, he said, is the President's illness; "his food was poisoned", Damachi alleged. Asked whether he meant "food poisoning" or that someone had deliberately poisoned the President's food, Damachi shrugged, replying "The President inherited Obasanjo's kitchen staff"; Yar'Adua has now fired them all, and the kitchen has been cleaned out following the incident, Damachi said. At the same time, Damachi went on, the President did attend functions on both the Saturday and Sunday preceding his illness and ate some food at both of them. "What President eats at a function?", Damachi asked rhetorically. The President was so sick that the day he signed the budget, he was unable to sign a second piece of legislation awaiting his approval, the appointment of the current Acting Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) as the new Chairman. (Note: We have not heard from other circles recently that Lamorde will move up to the position and actually officially take on the title of his old boss and mentor Nuhu Ribadu. End Note) The government is keeping it all very quiet, but the incident "reflects very bad security," Damachi stated.

¶3. (C) The President's health exacerbates the other problems, Damachi went on. The northern leadership does not believe that Yar'Adua's health will allow him to serve out his four year term; that would mean that the presidency would pass to Vice President Goodluck Jonathan and to the south, which is anathema to the North, Damachi said. In fact, the underlying reason the tribunal ruled against Bayelsa Governor Timipre Silva was to undercut Jonathan's power base, he claimed. It is not yet a question of who will replace Yar'Adua, he said; the more important question at the present time is how to replace him. Yar'Adua has been in office for a whole year, and "nothing is happening. It may look as though things are happening, but it is all theater, before the television cameras." The ongoing probes, such as of the electric power generation debacle, suit the North because they expose the corruption of the last administration, Damachi said.

¶4. (C) What happened at the Health Ministry (Note: Former President Obasanjo's daughter, Senator Obasanjo-Bello, Nigeria's Health Minister, Minister of State and several civil servants are under indictment following accusations that they received naira 300 million (USD 2.5 million) of Ministry funds for personal use. End Note) has happened elsewhere, Damachi said, but with different outcomes. For example, the Minister of Defense was approached at Christmas time by a group of generals who brought him a gift of naira 500 million (USD 4.3 million). The Defense Minister was smart, Damachi noted, and went immediately to the President to tell him what had happened. The Defense Minister also told the President that the young officers are very critical of the generals, who they say are corrupt and use monies

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budgeted for military matters for personal and political use.

It was for that reason that earlier this year the President ordered long overdue back pay and pensions be paid and military salaries raised, Damachi said.

¶5. (C) The decision of the Supreme Court on appeals by All Nigeria People's Party candidate Muhammedu Buhari and Action Congress candidate former Vice President Atiku Abubakar from the tribunal's validation of Yar'Adua's election is going to be issued on or about May 29, Damachi said. If the Supreme Court invalidates the tribunal's decision and orders a new election, Senate President David Mark will assume the Presidency until the election takes place within 90 days. The North distrusts Mark, who is a "coup plotter"; as a former military signals officer, he is trained to "tell the troops what to do", Damachi said. The North doesn't want Mark in power for even a short time, Damachi said. (Note: Senate President David Mark also has his problems as his election seat was recently overturned in February. End Note)

¶6. (C) IBB met recently in Minna, Niger State with "the boys" to discuss the situation, Damachi said. They "planned to act in June", Damachi said, but are now taking into account the dates of the Supreme Court decision. Asked to elaborate, Damachi said he had queried IBB, who did not respond. "I'm glad I will be in China," Damachi chuckled. One of his next books will be entitled "Why Democracy is Bad for Africa", Damachi volunteered. He favors benevolent dictatorships, along the lines of those in Singapore or Malaysia, to bring countries along until they are developed sufficiently to make democracy work.

¶7. (C) Comment: We have heard this same general story line: Northern elites fearful the Presidency will revert to the South, military restive, vague allusions to some sort of action that will involve retired generals or former military heads of state, from other southern interlocutors. Damachi offered no more proof of his assertions than have others. Nonetheless, in light of his close relationship with IBB, we repeat the conversation here for what it is worth. End Comment.

¶8. (U) This cable was cleared by the Embassy in Abuja.  
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